



ABSOLUTE ABSOLUTION

The Forgiveness of Original Sin by Ministers of Government Schooling

By John Taylor Gatto

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"...the teacher always is the prophet of the true God and the usherer in of the true kingdom of God."

~ John Dewey, My Pedagogic Creed (1897) ~

Program, ideology, philosophy, theology - all are frames of meaning differing in the degree of conviction they require from us, the amount of sustained passion we assent to conferring upon them. If a frame of meaning conforms to our inner reality it can sustain itself across millennia as Christianity did; if it does not, it withers away regardless of how much energy its defenders expend in its service - witness the Soviet Union after 85 years or our common-school system after 140.

Frames of meaning. What do we want? What should we seek? When answers to such questions linger long enough they become foundations of a civilization, as the Christian curriculum became a major architectural support of Western civilization. Since about the 4th century A.D., widely shared beliefs in four realms of thought have created a geopolitical entity distinct enough to recognize as "The West". Two of its invisible support pillars come out of the North of Europe, two out of the South: these Western ideas are major continuities in our lives, bases upon which we live and act - or react. Without such forges of meaning people tend to go a bit crazy.

About a century and a half ago certain ideological, philosophical, and theological interests set out to revoke the Christian charter of Western civilization. On the basis of Christian political history these groups decided that Christianity was unable to organize society rationally. Put another way, that Christianity was unable to lead the human race out of warfare into a state of permanent peace, out of sectarianism into unity, out of nationhood into a global state, a world government, and out of confusion into the light. These groups, which were not unified in any formal way, still shared the common purpose of eliminating Christianity as a political force, and beginning in the first decades of the 19th century each of the groups, (although for widely differing motives) came to see government compulsion schooling as a vehicle to achieve that end, as well as other desirable ends. The groups I'm talking about included, but weren't limited to, utopian socialists, the embryonic labor movement which regarded churches as allies of management, the decaying associations of guild craftsmen, Deists, Unitarians, Transcendentalists, and Freethinkers, scientific rationalists of the Positivistic stripe, Enlightenment Liberals, manufacturing and commercial interests, and pragmatic social and economic thinkers.

Much of the great confusion attendant upon understanding the rise of government schooling comes from the fact it was simultaneously sponsored and shepherded by a bewildering array of interests who emerged and disappeared in a cyclical way, exchanging positions of prominence with each other according to accidents of circumstance. Many participants in the effort had a foot in more than one camp, in some cases, such as that of Orestes Brownson, in almost all the camps, and some of the motives for supporting forced schooling went beyond the cancellation of a Christian curriculum, or stopped at some point short of completely cancelling it. But without being aware of the deconstruction of sectarian Christianity being a central goal of institutional schooling, it is impossible to understand the profound disturbance state schooling has wrought in our society by removing two cornerstones of our Western heritage and replacing them with what so far have been inadequate substitutes. Imagine a table missing two of its legs, in whose place are a stack of dishes and a large dog; the table may look the same on its surface but who knows whether it will get you through dinner. Whether the net result of this undertaking has been so far positive or negative will depend, of course, on your own outlook.

The four principal supports of Western civilization are these:

1.) A unique belief in the sovereign rights of the individual. These rights are always in balance with the rights of the collective, but the dominant partner is the individual and not the collective. This phenomenon occurs in no other civilization as unmistakably as our own.

2) The scientific vision. A way of thinking which allows complex wholes to be treated as simple fragments and encourages the breaking of the integrity of nature for the presumed net benefit of human beings.

3) The need for atonement. This arises from the allegory of the "Fall" and from certain specific burdens assigned to mankind upon expulsion from Eden.

4) A code of moral behavior. As it was set down in the 10 commands of the Old Testament and the Gospels of the New Testament.

Notice that 1) and 2), although found in various concentrations in the Mediterranean world, were refined and became the dominant characteristic of Northern Europe, and 3)/4) were principally circulated through missions from the Roman church of Southern Europe, although the transfer of this code to North America was performed exclusively by agents of the Northern outlook. Thus the reciprocity of these four ideas surging back and forth across the face of Europe for 15 centuries, and across oceans and continents for the past 4 has fashioned a tough and enduring hybrid form out of which personal meaning can so successfully be fashioned that it dominates the planet.

Now, whether you are Christian or not, a poor Christian or a good one, if you live in a Western land or deal with representatives of the West you must find a way to come to terms with each of the organizing principles I named, including Christianity, because each leads to forms of behavior and valuing. You may reject some or all of this, true, but nonetheless your life and relationships will be profoundly affected by your choices. Every Western institution has been importantly shaped by the Christian curriculum, a shaping now invisible but none the less psychoactive because it cannot be seen.

Before we go on and get into the specifics of the Christian curriculum I want to point out there are other codes of meaning available that don't stem from Christianity, even in the Christian world. For instance each of the first two pillars of Western civilization can be used to generate an entire curriculum from. Rather than acting in concert with Christianity, each, or both in a hybrid form, can be forced to produce an entire code of behavior. The sovereign rights of the individual are a legacy from the great pagan tradition of Europe's Nordic Rim, a gift of the Vikings and warrior chiefs. The code that derives from this is still the code in action in English upper-class boarding schools, a code which numbers among its operating principles: leadership, sportsmanship, courage, team-play, self-sacrifice, devotion to duty, and disdain for hardship. A fuller explication of this code is caught in the scene from Macbeth where Duncan denies he possesses the 12 "kingly virtues", and a little research in your dusty Shakespeare will reveal how well this engine of meaning had been formalized by the early 17th century.

Another code of meaning possible to organize one's life about comes most clearly from the great trading civilization of 16th and 17th century, Holland. It is variously known as "middle-class values" or petit bourgeois values, or even in Max Weber's mistaken formulation as "The Protestant Ethic", but since it antedates the Reformation it is well to keep in mind that it is a fairly radical deviation from traditional Christianity. Its attributes include:

- 1) Self-discipline
- 2) Deferred satisfaction
- 3) Ambition
- 4) Hard Work
- 5) Specialization
- 6) Comfort-seeking
- 7) Avoidance of conflict, where possible.
- 8) Materialism

Still another code of meaning can be extracted from the scientific vision which can speak to every decision in life; it generates five major themes of behavior:

1. A Questioning Attitude: Nothing remains unexamined or unchallenged. Respect is a counter-productive virtue.
2. Objectivity: Feelings cloud judgment. Thinking works best when everything is considered a lifeless object.
3. Neutrality: Make no lasting commitments. Loyalty is the end of flexibility/maximum advantage.
4. Instrumentalism: Knowledge is Power
5. The Scientizing of Society: Surface behavior is all that has any meaning. The measurement, prediction, and control of behavior, security, and freedom from want is the end meaning of human life.

Each of the three curricula I've given you - none of them Christian in origin - are intertwined in every aspect of our world, as they must have been at every period in Western history. Christians behave in some of these ways and honor some of these things, but they do not, with a few exceptions, overlap the Christian code. I'm deliberately withholding what I think that is for a while until the terms of this investigation are clear: we are not exploring religion but principles of behavior and meaning - attitudes and values are the game we stalk, not God.

Somewhere at the beginning of the 20th century schools set out to recover the lost Eden of Christianity by reversing certain penalties inflicted after the Fall which are set down in the Book of Genesis. If we're going to get anywhere together I need you to think of my expression "lost Eden" not as a romantic metaphor, but a real possibility. For you to see it this way doesn't require donning a religious habit, but merely examining the state of Eden as described in Genesis before the Fall. Nothing I'm about to say can't be verified from the Gideon Bible in any motel drawer. Eden looked like this:

- 1) It had a beautiful Nature, completely tamed.
- 2) The idea of right and wrong didn't exist there.
- 3) There was no work to do.
- 4) Food was abundant.
- 5) There was no shame in Eden.
- 6) There were no great passions in Eden.
- 7) There was no fear of Death in Eden.

Those are Eden's seven framing timbers if it could be rebuilt.

I hope you can see that when anatomized in this rational, matter-of-fact way, that there is a real intellectual temptation to believe that Eden could be rebuilt. It doesn't even require faith in the existence of God to imagine a completely tame Nature, plenty of food, no shame, no work, ignorance of right and wrong...indeed I've just described New York City for you. The fear of Death is a little stickier but certainly it's not a very long reach to believe that Death could be whipped - given the right investment in research Science, hospitals, doctors, medicines, public hygiene, etc., etc., and on the way to that point the progress of old age can be retarded by cosmetics, diets, creams, unguents, potions, masks, surgery; whatever it takes.

Great passions also seem well on the way to becoming tamed. In a welfare society without substantial mystery or danger, the only passions which appear to survive are the excitement of violence and the excitement of fornication, which may be the same thing. No student of television or film, popular music or journalism can be unaware that the vital core of these media is violence and fornication in one or another disguised state, nor that the constant presentation of dramatic representations of these things makes the reality less and less able to arouse. I remember an exercise I used to perform with school classes early in my career before I realized I had no right to do it. I would ask kids to tell me about the most horrible physical accident they had ever witnessed: car crashes, bus accidents, people

falling out of windows, heart attacks, street murders, (at least half my Harlem kids had seen one or more of these); then I would ask the kids to tell the class how they felt. Invariably the students, always teenagers, would say it made them feel horrible, etc., etc. At that point I would challenge the speaker openly, saying that since the kid had seen much worse on television and in the movies he was just faking the feeling. I said I guessed most people felt nothing at all apart from curiosity.

At that point some incredible dam would burst and "truth" would pour forth; hands wildly waving, children would deliver incredible confession after incredible confession of having witnessed ghastly things with not the slightest trace of feeling.

"But where did you learn to fake it?" I would ask.

"From television!" "From movies!" "My mother told me what to say I felt!"

So you'll forgive me for saying that Eden, as described in Genesis, doesn't seem to be very far-fetched for the architects of schooling, and if it could be achieved without picking up the burden God assigned after the Fall (which I still haven't gotten to) the house of Western identity might really be able to stand on just two of its four legs. After all, if Eden was the prize of Christianity and Eden was within the reach of Science and Sociology, the Science of Humanity, who needed the mumbo-jumbo to get there?

Indeed, there was no religion at all in Eden; its occupants were able to speak directly to God. No religion, so anyone attempting to renew the notion of Eden was justified in eliminating or sharply modifying the commands of God allegedly preserved in literary form by the sects of the Christian religion. The easiest way to do this was not by rejecting what had passed as God's advice for centuries, but in reducing it from theology to philosophy, a less compelling frame of meaning, and then by rational discussion to show that elsewhere on the planet, or in other parts of our own society, people held contrary philosophies. That these were just "opinions", one almost as good as another. Many technical ways to introduce this relativistic strain into curricula were tried from the advent of factory schooling onwards, the most recent, perhaps, being curriculum games of "situational" ethics where even murder or abandonment of one's parents becomes the "right" behavior. Various named "global" curricula or "rainbow" curricula are, operationally, the same thing.

It's time now to look at the Christian curriculum as it comes to us from Moses and Christ, or rather I should say the "first - Christian curriculum because there are two, both equally important in framing the meaning of Western civilization.

The First Christian Curriculum:

- 1) Respect the Mysteries; know your place.
- 2) Respect your parents and ancestors.
- 3) Don't kill your fellow man
- 4) Don't steal.
- 5) Don't lie or bear false witness.
- 6) Don't envy others.
- 7) Bear witness to the good things.
- 8) Love, care for, and help others.

Near the end of the 19th century a group of scientific moralists, backed up by industrial wealth, an upperclass pagan outlook, and great political sophistication came to believe that they could synthetically impose a new ethical code, an "ethical culture", on humanity by restoring Eden. They would do this by wiping away Original Sin, then subordinating the curriculum of Christianity (which had a modest value as a philosophy if the theological base could be extinguished) to the curriculum of Science. On the upper levels of society the curriculum of classical paganism as written down by the Stoic Marcus Aurelius, would

become the guiding code of the ruling aristocracy in place of the curriculum of Science which lacked the power to inspire great leadership.

-2-

My Scottish Presbyterian wife Janet, is fond of reminding me that only the Pope's gang believes that sins can be taken away. She ignores the many groups that came to be called "liberal" Christians, including the Unitarians, who aren't really Christians at all. Nevertheless, in the strictest theological sense she's almost right. Calvin is pretty clear on the matter - there is no such thing as Sin and Redemption; to Calvin the idea of Right and Wrong is a heresy, since both the Elect and the Damned are preassigned to Heaven or Hell quite independent of their behavior. We're so unused to thinking this way any more that it might be best to regard Puritan Reformation Christianity as a kind of a caste system, from which there was no escape.

Sin was permanent and indelible and you were born with it; no descendant of Adam and Eve could escape the penalties while alive, or the ultimate penalty of damnation after death without God's Grace. And there wasn't any way to earn that Grace.

Liberal Christianity aside, the main line of descent from Calvin through Cambridge University, the laboratory of Puritanism, to Massachusetts Bay was a belief that civil society had to be set up in such a way as to take into account the sad fact most of its citizens were doomed.

This idea was turned into habits of child-rearing, so that long after the theology that spawned them was seemingly extinct, the notion was communicated behaviorally. It was also embedded into institutional protections for the Elect from the hordes of the Damned, in court procedures and legislative habits and in literally hundreds of other invisible ways. You do not need to believe as the Puritans believed to live and feel and think as the Puritans thought; you don't even have to know who the Puritans were to be their faithful disciple. The entire profession of psychoanalysis and counseling is a translation of Puritan obsessions into modern Enlightenment costume; prying into secrets is the main line of defense for a Puritan world-view.

The very complex beginnings of the common school movement in early 19th century New York and in Massachusetts were both a recognition that something would have to be done to contain the Damned in the New World, and - at one and the same time - a radical rejection of the idea that anyone was damned - or even that any of the rules of traditional religion applied in the New World. It is this bonding of the wildest contradictions that has made the American school puzzle so hard to solve. The Calvinist part of American schooling is up on the surface and very easy to trace, but the part in service to what Allan Bloom has called "the new American religion" has not to my knowledge ever been brought into the light for close inspection. We all know, for example, of the critical involvement of Unitarians in the creation of compulsion schooling; what we don't know is "Why?"; in service to what precise dream of the future?

We are faced with the paradox of a powerful, repressive Calvinist strain built into the machinery of schooling, and at the same time, of a powerful anti-Calvinist strain built into the mechanism too; like the little mill that grinds salt, both little religious mills continue to grind furiously inside the school institution as it prepares to enter the 21st century. The future the totalitarian part would make for us is extremely easy to envision, and in fact has happened a number of times in this century; the anti-religious part, however, is also busy at work creating a future that Christians and non-Christians alike seem to turn from in revulsion. Why that is so is wrapped up in the cancellation of traditional Christian meaning, I think, without being able to supply an adequate substitute. But you will make your own mind up when you have more information in hand.

-3-

Somewhere around 1905 our schools were charged for the first time with the challenge of forgiving Original Sin. Obviously no directive said that literally, but school procedures and personnel, places and curriculum, began to be shaped to guide the new institution in that direction. To see what I mean, the time has come to discuss what Original Sin's legacy was to Western civilization. For eating from the Tree of Knowledge (of Good and Evil) Adam and Eve were sentenced to pass to their descendants:

1) A knowledge of Good and Evil. Every behavior would offer a free will choice of one or the other, every action would have to be evaluated. What a headache this constant judgment would be!

2) Labor. Now people would have to labor for their bread, to become productive beings instead of God's guests. What a backache work would be!

3) An emotional nature. Human beings would be subjected to desires from which would come pain and suffering. Without self-control passions would bring continual heartache!

4) Death. Men and women would return to dust when life was done and everyday would bring them one step closer.

It's not hard to see, of course, that each of these obligations, willingly shouldered, are the making of a good, strong, productive, and quite wonderful life; but it's equally easy to see that every one also poses a strong temptation to whine, lament and cheat destiny. The Christian vision, naturally, would be that to cheat God out of His punishment would in the end lead nowhere because Death, itself, could not be cheated or long delayed. The orthodox Christian view before the Reformation was that human nature is good and equal to the burdens. That through cheerful acceptance of them a human creature, however weak, could win Redemption from Original Sin. It was a spectacular motivation for private action, and since Heaven was the same for the poor as for the rich, it is easy to see the psychological strength such a contract bestows on its covenanters. Human nature through hard work is perfectible, the doctrine of sin and redemption carries within it the seeds of a self-activating curriculum which, even for non-believers influenced by it, gives meaning and direction to life. The religious aspect aside, this is a basic, matter-of-fact set of practical guidelines, street lamps for the village of your life.

There are other "lighting" systems as I pointed out earlier, but none with a record of staying power like this one.

-4-

So nobody had to wander aimlessly in the Christian world, what constituted a meaningful life was clearly spelled out. Self-knowledge, duty, responsibility, preparation for death - all these were up to you; no teacher or guru could do the work for you. People being people, however, each of the themes had inherent in it its own heresy, some way to beat the game.

For instance, developing your rational mind suggested ways to cut through God's secrets, the secrets of Nature, and avoid the penalties of Evil. The great deep magical tradition of pagan Europe from which the scientific tradition was born - that attitude that you can get something for nothing by cleverness - peeks forth tantalizingly from the "Wisdom of Solomon" in the Apocrypha:

He it was who gave me true understanding of things as they are: a knowledge of the structure of the world and the operation of the elements; the beginning and end or epochs and their middle course; the alternating solstices and changing seasons, the cycles of the years and the constellations; the nature of living creatures and

behavior or wild beasts; the violent force of winds and human thought; the varieties of plants and the virtues of roots. I learned it all, hidden or manifest.

Wisdom of Solomon 15-21

Apocrypha (Revised English Bible)

By understanding Nature you might devise machines to extract her bounty without Labor, and by understanding human nature and power you might turn human beings into slave-machines to do your own labor for you.

By understanding the ways of other, more physical cultures, you might learn to surrender to the temptations of sensual indulgence and escape unscathed, drink every cup to the dregs, exploit every sexual opportunity, exhaust every urge to violence and license - and still find spiritual justifications for your conduct through the doctrine of the "justified sinner", just as the Ranter sect did. Or you might devise a multi-tiered morality as the Egyptians had, where the highest ranks in secret could indulge themselves while preaching abstinence to the masses. Sort of like smoking dope but claiming if you were caught that you didn't inhale.

And you could even cheat Death for a while, as John D. Rockefeller spent so much effort and money trying to do. Consider that a significant portion of the entire modern scientific establishment is bent to the task of postponing the inevitable - and removing its inevitability. Indeed, of each of the other three competitive curriculums that grew up with Christianity in the West (see earlier) only the scientific curriculum is in violent conflict with each base of Christian curriculum. The two cannot live together as equals; unless Christianity dominates, it will die in the presence of Science.

Now all this might be only a matter of dusty academic interest except for the uncomfortable truth that these pillars of meaning hold up the house of the Western world. To the extent that school violates one or another, our purpose in living is jeopardized. Without taking any sides on the moral question which is right or wrong, and focusing entirely on the psychological question whether a sane and stable life can come from the religion or science, we need to take a closer look at the destination the competing God of science is indicating when it contradicts the Christian curriculum.

Of necessity I have to oversimplify here in order to get a handle on very slippery concepts at all. Hopefully each reader will realize I make no promise of the whole truth in what follows, only a start along a promising trail hitherto obscured in underbrush. Here is the net result of my own reflection, set down starkly. The scientific curriculum has as its poles:

1. You can't know too much, There is no good or evil. Knowledge can give you the same magical power that God has. Did He destroy Sodom and Gomorrah with fire? Then we can turn the night sky over the Sinai to flame as well with our war machinery. We are God.

2. Work is a curse to be avoided. Do as little as you can get away with. Quality is subjective, it is more important that the customer (teacher) be pleased than that quality be achieved. The package is more important than the product, the sales pitch more important than either. Only stupid people work; machines and slaves are there for those who understand.

3. Good feeling is what life is all about; there is nothing besides our sense data. Take as much as you can of it, as often as you can. Check out everything; leave no stone unturned in your search for sensual pleasure. There is no good or bad but thinking makes it so. Grab for gusto, you only go around once.

4. Death and sickness is the ultimate evil. Use as much magic, pills, potions, lotions, surgery, aerobics, etc. as you can to stave off death. Young is the name of the game when it's all said and done, power its only substitute. Take vitamins, listen to doctors, think about your health, issue a blank check to the magical industry dedicated to erasing this scourge of God from human affairs.

None of these prescriptions: knowledge, the easy life, fun, fame, accumulations; can provide much meaning to existence; each is a very limited benefit and more easily attained than we acknowledge. Serious literature, from Marcus Aurelius' *Meditations* to Fellini's *Dolce Vita*, is virtually a unanimous pronouncement that the material game isn't worth the candle; fairy tales from King Midas across the whole corpus of Grimm and Anderson delve frequently into what is really important and what isn't. And yet this trivia is the curriculum of modern schooling. Somewhere it was decided to absolve the young of Original Sin, this would be the absolute absolution: freed from its penalties, a new scientific utopia might eventually result after a different set of operating principles was inscribed on the blank tablets of childish minds. It seemed impossible that this effort, surreptitiously made on the part of Unitarians, Quakers, Anglicans, Positivists, and others, and defiantly attempted on the part of Utopian socialists, progressives, and members of the many odd little sects (and some not so little) which flourished in the 19th century, could not improve on Christian superstition. Well, that's hubris for you.

-5-

It has never been the method of the West to operate for very long on the basis of faith; what doesn't work in a psychological sense is eventually discarded, even though a grim price may have been paid for a trial period. What I've been calling the Christian curriculum had been around in a recognizable form for about 15 centuries when scientific schooling, beginning in earnest about 1900 after a 50-year warm-up period, decided to chuck it out.

The disestablishment of Christianity was undertaken in stages, the most gentle of which was the one-room schoolhouse period when the Bible was presented in every classroom de-spiritualized - as a great work of philosophy and good advice, with Jesus making a regular appearance as a nice man and a purveyor of good advice.

The pattern of the West comes from these assumptions: that there is such a thing as Truth which applies at all times. We believe that no person or group has the whole truth, however, so there is no final human authority. For this reason we scorn both credentialed experts and nihilists and whiners. We think that every person, rich or poor, has some aspect of the truth from the angle of his own background, and so each person has something to contribute. We believe that truth unfolds in time by a cooperative process of discussion that creates a temporary consensus; we hope to approach truth this way by successive stages.

Given all this you can catch some glimmering of the radical nature of State confinement schooling, which presents a world of supposed expert specialists who impose some abstract orthodoxy from the top down. The institution is a contradiction of all that has gone before - as the well-respected American historian Bernard Bailyn said in his provocative essay, "Education in the Forming of American Society" (1960).

Late 19th century education did not grow from known 17th century seeds; it was a new and unexpected genus whose ultimate character could not have been predicted and whose emergence troubled well-disposed, high-minded people.

All of the conventional, historically developmental essays you may have read about the growth of our schools are fairy tales; they are a forced growth, very recent in origin, whose bizarre and complicated mission hides behind matter-of-fact publicity handouts about

reading, writing, and arithmetic. One of the arms of that mission is to restore Eden by cancelling the Christian curriculum.

School is only one of the agencies of a profound philosophical vision which seem aimed at producing an Eden-like utopian future. It might be worth mentioning a few others to break the hypnotic state most of us enter when we hear the word "school". I want to confess I don't see it as a self-contained institution at all but part of something much larger which includes the economy, our social relationships, our connections to ourselves and our families, our contract with the sovereign government, with nature, and with many other things, too.

In this larger engine of which school is a part, we want to keep in mind a centrally managed economy which has managed to divert the bulk of its labor into jobs that don't need doing, so by now almost everyone has caught onto the fact it doesn't matter very much whether we do our work well or not. Keep in mind that we have allowed, since 1914, a group of private bankers to determine the value of our currency, whether business enterprise expands or contracts, and that these private individuals, who are mostly unknown to the public, have been given the magical power to create money or destroy it as they see fit. Thus the responsibility of managing has been removed from our shoulders. Keep in mind the content of our commercial entertainment industry, the unparalleled destructive power of the legal tobacco industry, and many, many other anomalies of 20th century life and you will see that each of these things constitutes, in one of its aspects, hard evidence that Eden is possible to regain. Just abandon notions of right and wrong, treat work lightly, surrender to passion, keep out of the way of old age and death - and you have it. A new Adam. A new Eve.

It is difficult for all of us, believers and non-believers alike, to untangle the spiritual tradition of the West from its religious/political tradition which has produced countless occurrences of intolerance, bigotry, persecution, and other disfigurements. Yet we're going to have to make a stab at it if you're to see that personal and congregational Christianity has had, and still retains, tremendous vitality and power because it addresses an important aspect of our humanity left otherwise untended in a secular age. It is quite possible to stand in awe of the quiet strength conferred by personal Christianity at the same time you feel some horror at the institutional vehicle which conveys it. In any case, I'd urge you to separate the two things in order to understand the mistake 19th and especially 20th century social engineers made when they set out to extinguish the Christian curriculum. What they gained in political power they lost many times over. They sowed a psychological epidemic of meaninglessness which, from where I sit, looks to be well out of control.

Unlike political Christianity, personal Christianity at its heart has always been tentative and flexible about interpreting the word of God; this style compels active participation from the believer in the completion of meaning, not mindless acolytes. At its maximum power this kind of personal Quest creates Bartleby the Scrivener, humble people with the strong will of Kings. Thomas Aquinas talks about this tentative quality in *Summa Theologiae*:

Revelation is not oracular...Propositions do not descend on us from heaven ready made, but are more a draft of work in progress than a final and completed document, for faith itself, though rooted in immutable truth, is not crowning knowledge, and its elaboration in teaching, namely, theology, is still more bound up with discourses progressively manifesting fresh truths or fresh aspects of the truth to the mind. So the individual Christian grows...in understanding; indeed, they must if, like other living organisms, they are to survive by adaptation to a changing environment of history, ideas, and social pressures.

Aquinas said that in 1260 at a time when his voice was almost decisive in church affairs; his high order intellect makes him authoritative in the affairs of the Roman church even today. Observations like this one help us to see that the black eye Western church politics gave the religious life is a long way from the whole of the story.

The trust that Aquinas was willing to extend human nature was withdrawn by the radically different psychological outlook of the 16th century Reformation. Suddenly the world became an evil place and the mortal side of Man evil with it. This critical transformation entered Europe much earlier from Persia and Zoroastrianism in the 7th century B.C., arriving in the western mind from Persian influence on the Hebrews during their Babylonian captivity. It came from another direction, too, that of the Greek rationalists which surrounded and deeply influenced early Christian thinkers.

This at one time heretical view that the world was evil remained peripheral for centuries, but thanks to its development in Augustine's City of God, one of the immortal books of the West written in the late 4th century, the God of Forgiveness came slowly to be supplanted by the angry God of the Puritans. City of God is the first major landmark of the Puritan point of view, one in which God is seen as Saviour not for everyone but only for an exclusive few.

It was the attempt to restore the loving God to center stage, or failing that to wash one's hands of the whole God business, which ended up in a titanic, yet invisible struggle in the 18th century colonies and early Republic between American Puritans and their own descendants. Between the end of the Revolution and the Jackson Presidency in 1832 Calvinists of the Congregational religion battled the forces of so called "liberal" Christianity concentrated in the Unitarian sect and its allies, in politics as well as pulpits. Just after the turn of the 19th century, two impressive victories in Boston - where Harvard management fell to Unitarian control - and New York City - where a Quaker private corporation calling itself the Public School Society was given exclusive access to tax money - signaled the eventual outcome of the contest. Although it would not be until mid-century that public school legislation would be passed in both places, from this time forward the momentum ran against Calvinism.

But something strange and perhaps unexpected happened as a byproduct of this changeover. In struggling against the vengeful God it was necessary to mount so many compelling arguments against the established religion that inevitably some of this violent energy was directed against every position held by that religion. Christ the Redeemer was reinterpreted and de-spiritualized. Now he was presented as a model of character but without divinity, or sometimes as a divinity accessible to everyone who sought after it. This "men as gods" position was especially popular among the intellectual classes. This transformation robbed the Christian curriculum of its power, reducing it from a grave obligation to a set of good ideas that had to compete against other sets of good ideas. Eventually toward the end of the century the Christian curriculum of duty, service, hard work, cheerful resignation, independence, etc. showed serious erosion and the scientific management in schools of the 20th century removed it entirely.

The dimensions of the tragedy this uncovered have only been slowly revealed as the 20th century wore on, but they remained unnoticed by the enthusiastic progressive forces who pulled it off. The angry God was not only gone but the idea of God along with Him.

When Reformation Christianity came to see man as evil where once he had been good, albeit weak; when Evil came to be seen as a tangible commodity with Satan as its distributor, there was no recourse but to build within the institutions of society protection against beings who could not be trusted. Prisons, workhouses, police, insane asylums, hospitals and schools lay in embryo along with that radical Persian notion of human nature.

If human beings were evil they had to be watched all the time - controlled, confined and punished. If you were "liberal" these things had to be done for other people's own good, and evil was perhaps seen as sickness which required "treatment". But in the end, among those who held the Reformation view of human nature, whether Calvinist or Unitarian, Presbyterian or Quaker, the net result looked pretty much the same - the road to an institutional future was open wide.

On the secular side, Thomas Hobbes came down this same road in 1651 with Leviathan, his justification for a total State under the hand of a centralized elite, a State reaching into every nook and cranny of personal and family life. In the very conception were the 20th century schools which eventually resulted. The only missing piece in the confinement strategy was a proper psychological theory to offer an explanation why such a scheme would work - human experience with confinement by intimidation held out no reliable promise of conversion to the master's way of thinking among the confined. In regard to the imaginative conception of forced mass schooling, would parents be content to have their children live this way? Would the kids stand for it?

Both answer and theory were supplied toward the end of the 17th century by Hobbes, and especially by the aristocrat John Locke. Children, said Locke, did not arrive into life with any coding at all, either good or evil. Innate ideas, as the habit of the day termed it, do not exist. Children were erasable tablets and could be written upon by anyone who had charge of their experience.

In the shadow of the French Revolution Helvetius dusted the same idea off and displayed it for the philosophes. Of course it was a spectacularly wrong idea, as every mother's common observation certainly told her, and from a scientific perspective, babies arrive with a full encyclopedia of genetic signals numbering in the hundreds of thousands; every one of them "innate". But wrong or not, this was such a useful idea, politically, that it proved irresistible.

In one of the great ironies of history, although Locke's ideas about individual liberty became a major causal factor in two great political revolutions aimed at freeing the human spirit, his psychological theory of the blank tablet child became the foundation for an exquisite and unprecedented tyranny of forced schooling two centuries later.

With a psychological theory of schooling in hand, it's time to return to the theological realm, where developments were occurring from the Reformation onward to set the stage for the great religious battles of the 19th century in the United States which ended in the creation of a new civic religion of government schooling which promised to restore the pre-Christian Eden.

Remember that if before the Reformation you could be saved by your own hard work, courage, self-control, and morality, then after it you could not - the only salvation lay in receiving the gift of mysterious Grace from God, which happened to only a fortunate few. Then, in what surely must be one of the most audacious conceptions in the whole history of mentality, the Reformation Christian was asked to accept that even the finest men and women were just as evil as the worst!

This is the basis for the most radical pedagogy - so roll that around in your mind long enough to see a part of its significance! Good people were evil too, according to the established religion of New England and points west; they differed from the Damned only in that they were "justified sinners", a category which meant they could not be kept from heaven by child molestation, mass murder, or bad cooking! If you can grasp even a little of the implications of such a notion you will see it means that nobody can be trusted, that everybody needs to be watched and spied upon, his behavior tabulated and filed. It means that families especially, with all their possibilities of promiscuous privacy, have to be reined in. All this stuff led to some of the phenomenal complications in human relationships characteristic of the modern world.

I hope you're still hanging on - because the main reason to write this down is to help you see that things you might believe belong in church, or are only dusty history, are alive and well and living in the bricks and mortar of your school and every other institution of modern life. We've just been stripped of the habit, and the familiar grammar and lexicon we need to talk about these things easily. Orwell saw that in 1984, when he considered the effects of disconnecting the human imagination from speculative concepts like "love" and "revolution" by a deliberate government sanitizing of language through schooling.

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The dilemma of Governor Bradford, John Cotton, the Mathers, and the rest of the distinguished company of Puritans who founded the Massachusetts colony was what shape a system of governance should take in light of the fact that:

- 1) The Arabella and the Puritan fleet which followed her in the next 11 years was loaded with wicked men and women.
- 2) Paradoxically, some of these wicked people were guaranteed Salvation whatever bad acts they committed, and others were doomed no matter how many good acts they did.
- 3) That family life had to take into account the certainty that some of its members were among the Damned even though they sat at the same table.
- 4) That the totality of the Poor were unmistakably damned because poverty was a sure sign of God's displeasure. Yet the cheap labor poor people represented was essential to prosperity.

It was a lively time all right, full of strange energy. Try to imagine the institutions you would invent to protect yourself against the doomed in such a world, the minute you do you begin to run right smack into some very familiar furnishings of our own time. Certainly you would want a lot of police and magistrates around; certainly weapons and you would be good friends, certainly you would want ways to keep a watch on strangers and their children.

Before long you might begin looking for ways to spy on your neighbors behind their closed doors; it might occur to you that the way children behaved was an indication of what the home was teaching. Perhaps you could arrange to get all the children together in a large shed and under the pretext of having them read and do sums you could watch them? How about sending "work" into their homes whose completion would be a measure of the mother's trustworthiness and diligence?

The best safety would lie in keeping everyone busy all the time until they were too worn out to cause mischief or even think about it. Beginning in childhood with exercises where every 40 minutes or so on a signal like a bell everyone gets up and changes tasks and places. The Devil finds work for idle hands. In a society filled with evil families and evil individuals, compulsion schooling of a particular character would surely be among the strategies hit upon.

Rewards and punishments would be the behavior shaper. Calvin had warned in 1535 that the Damned were so numerous no police system could contain them unless they were taught to police each other. Competition leading to rewards and punishments would be the management tool. The real tricks of behaviorist psychology were understood thoroughly hundreds of years before Watson and Skinner wrote them down. If the lost could be set against each other their Satanic potential could be neutralized.

I trust this description makes you squirm uncomfortably in your chair. To me it is particularly reminiscent of Andrew Carnegie's 1889 plan to set up a system of formal

schooling where common men, like salmon swimming upstream, are met by school waterfall after school waterfall at which they will expend revolutionary energies in something called "lifelong learning".

Thinking about this problem of controlling bad people was a constant throughout the Puritan period and it continued to be a powerful obsession long after the day dramatic religious imagery to describe it was abandoned; far into the time when the concepts of theology were translated into the concepts of modern psychology, a close inspection showed that only superficial nomenclature and methodology had changed. All contemporary psychology, whether laboratory or clinical, is a direct outgrowth of an intense study of the Damned and a view of human nature that requires micro management of their attitudes and behavior.

From advice to the Prince in 1519 to William James' pragmatism, Sigmund Freud's neuroses and the leading concepts of the "human potential" movement and its leadership, psychological systems have always been the way intellectuals sell their insights about human nature to the sovereign power, whatever that may be. The control of the Damned is always the motivation, a control which does not preclude treating them well and leading them back to Eden.

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When New England's orthodox leadership surrendered control after 180 years of political supremacy, the surrender was at first only partial. From the beginning of the 19th century until its middle leadership was shared between the onrushing Unitarian power and its ancestral Congregational form. During the transition period an important legacy was transferred from fathers to sons: the great problem, "What is to be done with the Damned?"

The most immediate cause of the changeover was the successful overthrow of England in the Revolution, an effort that required young men's energy and young men's ideas to bring about; in the de-institutionalization of one old order - the Anglican - another - the Congregationalist - was brought about, too. The flowering of New England was a young, optimistic man's game; to them nobody was damned: that was a conceit of troubled minds. If England could be beaten, the Indians driven out, and the fields, forests, and waters made to yield unprecedented wealth, then anything was possible.

It is impossible to read many of the writings of the New England hierarchy of Unitarianism without being impressed by a fantastic smugness of spirit, a fatuous self-congratulatory element which occurs even in Thoreau. Religiously its embodiment had been caught best in the enthusiastic excesses of a sect called "The Ranters," who had solutions to every problem - and believed they could do no wrong. The Ranters had been absorbed into Quakerism and from these, at least symbolically, the mold of progressivism was struck. Enthusiastic men and women set out to reverse what they considered to be the error of their parents: religious superstition. And yet these were not fools; that the poor were all over the place was undeniable

One of the new answers that emerged from liberal Christianity was scientific prisons, another, mental hospitals, still others, orphan asylums, workhouses, police forces and schools. The record of the first years of government schooling until about 1890 can be largely counted as an answer to the old Calvinist question about the Damned; the record of schools since then a great Quest for a new Atlantis inherent in the founding myths of traditional Christianity itself, the lost Eden.

The deconstruction of Reformation religious outlook left the puzzle of human nature and the puzzle of where God was located, in churches or the human heart? - or nowhere - to be wrestled with anew. Primitive Christianity had put Him inside each person, the Catholic Church had moved him into parish and cathedral, the Reformation into congregations; now in the aftermath of 300 years of passionate conflict the descendants of Puritanism,

following the lead of Kant, Fichte and Hegel in Germany were moving him into the State itself. The State, said Hegel, is God. And Hegel's voice came to be heard in every American school as the 19th century came to its end, because the leader of the American Hegelian movement was the most influential schoolman the country had ever seen, a national figure, William Torrey Harris.

By 1890 psycho-physical research laboratories in northern Germany, heavily attended by young American scholars from New England, had established that John Locke was almost right, children could be molded significantly. However, rather than being blank tablets, children were complex machines. Their programming, like the programming of any machine, was a matter of original design and correct adjustment. The best designs were, oddly enough, Germanic or Anglo-Saxon, but nothing could be done about that. In the matter of adjustment, however, the mass population could be rendered useful and harmless. The old religious nightmare of Evil and Chaos could finally be put to rest with psychological science. People were morally neutral, just as Locke had contended, but because of their machine nature they had only limited possibilities. A scientific State, lacking sentimentality, could adjust humanity to perfection.

But much had to happen before the machine metaphor got into the driver's seat of schooling. First, the bright young men of Boston and the Quakers of New York had to demonstrate in Lyceums, newspapers, drawing rooms and colleges just how wrong the old "human nature is evil" way really was, the old "no salvation through good works" song. Because Christian habits of hard work, morality, self-control and imminent mortality were so deeply ingrained in what seemed to be common-sense thinking as well as religion, the task was far from easy. It required all the genius, patience, sustained enthusiasm, political sophistication, scientific thought and firmness the Unitarian aristocracy could muster to turn the tide and forgive Original Sin.

But these men were determined and cheerfully united in a great cause.* They were up to the challenge.

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How would you go about eroding the notion of Good and Evil? Certainly not all at once as a libertine might do, but slowly and gradually. Evil can be renamed "psychosis" or "mental disease" and a new employment class of trained counselors and clinicians empowered to treat it with the instruments of "scientific" procedure, thus empowering another employment class of theoreticians and professors. Evil can be traced to the obsolete hothouse institution of the family instead of to Satan. The new demonology can be constructed from fathers and mothers, aunts and uncles, instead of from incubi and succubi - thus justifying government and professional action instead of prayer.

German philosophy had begun to target the family as a major danger as far back as the early 18th century; soon psycho-logy would verify that prescient hunch through the work of Freud and the psychoanalytic school. Preventive hygiene involved taking children away from mother, keeping her influence to a minimum; thus was the ancient German hatred* for womanhood scientifically validated and used to justify round-the-clock confinement in schools.

And if Evil was only a superstition to be dismissed along with Satan, then Good had to be brought to heel too, although it required a highly developed sensibility to see why. Good is a relative term: for something to be good other things have to be less good, worse, bad—and eventually on out to evil. You can't have goodness without evil, just as you can't really have God without some form of Satan. If evil people were really just sick, then good people were sick, too. We were all sick, then, and the best way to set up the planet would be as a hospital ward where the least sick cared for the rest of us.

An important step, then, along the road to the Eden school would ultimately regain for us, was its use to eliminate sharp distinctions of right and wrong. No behavior so bad it led to

permanent expulsion, no performance so good it entitled its owner to special treatment. Slowly and steadily, decade after decade, the leveling continued until the point was reached where New York City could hire a schools chancellor who boasted in print that he had once sold drugs and a President could nominate as Attorney General a woman who confessed to criminal behavior and tax evasion only to qualify herself for the position. Just as the Puritans had warned us, we were all evil, but in the return to Eden we were instructed by our schoolmasters that it didn't really matter.

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In 1919, a great laudatory history of American education was written which preempted the field of school history for nearly 50 years and made its author rich. Ellwood P. Cubberly's *Public Education in the United States*, written while he was Dean of Teacher Education at Stanford, supplied instant national myths around which all thinking about schools - by legislatures, taxpayers, journalists, parents - was forced to coalesce. Wonderfully illustrated, Cubberly's narrative is the tale of a great national triumph, hardly broken by a dark note as obstacle after obstacle is smashed out of the way by the zeal of Ranters. The contest is drawn with dramatic skill, between a chain of wise and benevolent pro-school folks extending through the centuries and a chain of narrow-minded, greedy people on a parallel chain. Only once in its 782 pages does this comprehensive history of progress falter in a shift of tone which Cubberly is unable to conceal. The dark shadow passes over the brightly textured pages swiftly so you have to pay careful attention to see it. Listen:

Since 1900, and *due more to the activity of persons concerned with social legislation* (emphasis mine)... than to educators themselves, there has been a general revision of the compulsory education laws....the school census has been changed so as to aid the location of children of compulsory school age, and special officers have been authorized or ordered to assist school authorities in enforcing the compulsory attendance laws. Having taxed their citizens to provide schools, the States have now required the children to attend and partake of the advantages provided....

One result of this legislation. ...These laws have brought into the schools not only the truant and the incorrigible, who under former conditions either left early or were expelled, but also many children...of inferior mental qualities who do not profit by ordinary classroom procedure. Still more, they have brought into the school the crippled, tubercular, deaf, epileptic, and blind, as well as the sick, needy and physically unfit. By steadily raising the age at which children may leave school...our schools have come to contain many children who...demoralize classroom procedure....a compulsory education law cannot create capacity to profit from education...within the past 25 years the whole attitude of the school toward such children has undergone a change, and an attempt, not always successful, has been made to salvage them....over-age children, refractory cases, corporal punishment....defeat the social and citizenship aims of the schools.

Poor Dr. Cubberly. Like so many schoolmen before him, like Horace Mann himself, he had believed himself to be a principal* in the creation of a bright new progressive institution that would bring the benefits of illuminated intelligence to the masses. His feeble protest to the unnamed "persons concerned with social legislation" in the passage above is surely an index of his sudden awareness of how decorative and ultimately unnecessary his own soft job really is - and how perilous the position of an academic without formidable patrons can be. When I despair of the Cubberly tradition as it is carried forward by contemporary academic "reform" voices like Gardner's and Finn's, Ravitch's andSizer's, I sometimes think of this passage from *Public Education in the United States* and forgive them.

We can extract a useful banner motto from Cubberly's whispered complaint, "The Demoralized Classroom", a classroom which our own era has inherited and demoralized even further. As Cubberly infers, it is not a real problem but an invented one, engineered

by people who knew exactly what they were doing. Cubberly's bewilderment need only be our own if we continue to avoid the obvious: that the social agenda of schooling and the social agenda of individuals and families is not the same thing.

Consider what the school agenda might be to sustain it through all these periods of complaint it has suffered: by mixing good kids and bad kids together in a laboratory setting both can learn from each other that they are pretty close to being the same. Of course bad kids beat up good kids and steal from them, but good kids rat on bad kids and humiliate them regularly. Both come to respect the other's power, by long familiarity they come to have contempt for it. A great leveling occurs. This is social engineering on a post-graduate level, worthy of the legends of Solomon, broken loose from the democratic tradition entirely.

We have clear statements of a pressing intellectual need to move to a position beyond good and evil from the mid-19th century onwards which come from all over the European and American world. Nietzsche's famous book of that title is only the most naked statement of the idea. Darwin, Galton, and Freud are saying the same thing; the entire matter of Dostoevski's Crime and Punishment is an exploration of the psychology of pretenders to Eden; the mystery of what the transcendentalists in Boston were really transcending is here also.

In the early 16th century at the dawn of experimental science, Machiavelli's intuition of a new psychological science is unmistakable; less than a century later the theme has reached Will Shakespeare's ears in Stratford, appearing in the mouth of Prince Hamlet as, "There's nothing good nor bad but thinking makes it so."

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In 1948 Alger Hiss, first president of the World Health Organization (WHO), redefined what good health means, in a paper he did for the Carnegie Endowment introducing the new association. In the course of this paper which makes much of redefining "health" as a state of mental and social well-being, not merely freedom from disease, Mr. Hiss refers respectfully to an eminent Canadian psychologist who wrote a "little gem" in this area, Dr. Brock Chisholm. I'd like to cite a few lines from the little gem itself so we can track together how far the elimination of good and evil progressed from Nietzsche to 1946. The following is from the journal Psychiatry (February, 1946):

Is there any force so potent and so pervasive that it can...produce inferiority, guilt and fear in all civilizations? There is - just one. The only lowest common denominator of all civilizations and the only psychological force capable of producing these perversions is morality, the concept of right and wrong....

In the old Hebrew story God warns the first man and woman to have nothing to do with good and evil. It is interesting to note that as long ago as that "good" is recognized as just as great a menace as "evil"....

...artificially imposed inferiority, guilt and fear, commonly known as sin...produces so much of the social maladjustment and unhappiness in the world....

The training of children is making a thousand neurotics for every one that psychiatrists can hope to help with psychotherapy.

The...eradication of the concept of right and wrong which has been the basis of child training, the substitution of rational thinking for faith...these are the...objectives....

...freedom from morality... free from the outmoded types of loyalty (family, culture, nation)...the magic fears of our ancestors....

I will skip over the obvious logical dilemma Dr. Chisholm has when he argues against the concept of right and wrong by pronouncing it, in essence, "wrong" to direct your attention to his emphasis on the training of children, which is, in his formulation (and presumably that of the World Health Organization, at least in 1948) to be sharply altered from its traditional position of a developer of intellect into a kind of behavioral laboratory where three concrete prejudices are to be "eradicated": 1) the concept of right and wrong; 2) faith in God, which is considered a "magic fear"; 3) family loyalty, which is, to Dr. Chisholm, "outmoded". Chisholm might well have plagiarized his text from the writings of the French positivist, Auguste Comte, so closely alike are they in their stances; indeed, his is a curriculum identical to that laid down by the scientific heirs of the French Enlightenment which was designed to produce a new, more cheerful proletariat for the industrial utopia of mid-19th century Europe.

The teachings of Comte, this movement's leader, had a very large influence on the progressive classes at the time of American schooling's inception - and through John Stuart Mill, who subsidized Comte, on the entire social welfare movement in the United States. Comte, too, held himself beyond good and evil, his inner circle functioned as a robed religion worshipping Mankind and Science. At its peak it included the parents of Herbert Croly, eventually editor of *The New Republic* and a man principally responsible for both the platforms of Teddy Roosevelt in 1912 and Franklin Roosevelt in 1932.

Some of the innate strangeness of American institutional life entered the thinking of 23-year-old Ken Kesey when he was writing *One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest*; it turns up in the speech of Dr. Peavey who runs the regular ward meeting for the cuckoos, where every patient is urged to confess his innermost thoughts and to peach on his fellows - loyalty belongs to the group, not to individuals. Only in this way, maintains Peavey, will a true "therapeutic community" ever be achieved: in other words, by abandoning privacy, loyalty, trust, etc.

I can remember clearly the last school at which I worked, Booker T. Washington Junior High School in Manhattan. A kind of good-natured dishonesty was the lingua franca of hall and classroom. Student thieves, including two kids of mine who robbed a grocery store, were regularly returned to class after a lecture from the Principal. Muggers, sexual predators, and drug/weapon carriers received the same benevolent treatment, usually within a few minutes of apprehension. One nice young fellow who was genuinely affable and philosophical, and who ran a crap game in the back of my room on a regular basis, smoked reefer intermittently, and undressed at least two girls a week against their will, gave me some advice in the most pleasant voice imaginable during my first week at Booker T. "Save yourself the trouble," said my young friend, "he'll just send me back up as soon as I get there." I thought different but he turned out to be right.

But the atmosphere at Booker T. Washington J.H.S. was quite the reverse of what you might expect from the stories I just told; the tone of the school was as good as the best that could be found in Community School District 3, between Columbia University and Lincoln Center on Manhattan's Upper West Side.

Even the "criminal element" (to be old-fashioned about it) there was relaxed and jovial rather than uptight and tense; the victims had adapted to their victimization with a fair degree of sportsmanship, and the *modus vivendi* extended into every operation in the building. I once heard a woman in the Teacher's Room call it the "last Indian treaty", "you leave us alone and we'll leave you alone." But it had a more powerful teaching function than that; thousands of silent witnesses to uncivilized behavior were learning how little value being good really had, or how little cost being bad entailed.

The lesson I'd like you to hold in mind for a while from this personal story is not how "awful" government schools are, though that is certainly true, but just how well the strategy of repealing Original Sin works. It depends on what goal you are working towards. An

institutional goal of relative peace and collegiality is better approached by eliminating distinctions than preserving them, even the distinctions between good and bad. This strategy doesn't work at all if intellectual development is your target but in 30 years of teaching in a number of different schools in Manhattan, I never encountered an administration who really cared about learning.

In 1991 the Justice Department estimated that 100,000 students enter school each day armed: that's 10 Army divisions. 900 teachers an hour are threatened, 40 an hour assaulted on school property. In keeping with our customary attitude toward children, the largest fraction of school crimes, students preying on other students, were not tabulated. The other three planks of the curriculum that derived from Original Sin and the Book of Genesis were much easier to overthrow than a sense of morality because an active pursuit of the scientific outlook - one of the four natural pillars of Western civilization - can be overstressed in order to provide what might be called "a procedural morality"; by which I mean that the various operations of observation, tabulation, inductive hypothesis, testing, recording, the cult of objectivity, etc., can be elevated to social attention in such a way as to appear to replace conventional morality with a thoroughly good-natured rational outlook.

When this is done, as it has been done in our culture for several centuries, material benefits are produced in such abundance as to raise serious questions about the value of the Christian curriculum. I'll deal with the other three penalties of Original Sin briefly so you can see what I mean:

Work. Until about 1800 work meant one thing for the most part: farm work. In 1700 twenty out of every twenty-one adults did farmwork. Of course farmwork was a great deal more than a way to make a living; it was a total, comprehensive way of life comprising shelter, sustenance, clothing, recreation, medicine, economy, socialization, pedagogy, and anything else you can name. Only one out of every 21 people was left over to make mischief. But over the past three centuries the agricultural and industrial revolutions appeared to solve the economic puzzle of food, clothing and shelter without requiring much work.

And that, of course, was true. But in accepting the solution of less work, contrary to the Biblical injunction, a powerful new problem was created that has proven to date without solution. That of course is the psychological, social, and spiritual problem that arises when you have no useful work to do. Phony work, no matter how well paid it is, causes such great distortions to emerge into human consciousness that we may well consider the major efforts of our civilization are now going into solving them - with no solutions in sight.

In any case, the problem of work seemingly solved by plentiful food and machines which only needed tending, another powerful imaginative force came into being to nail "work" into its coffin once and for all. I'm referring to advertising, the handmaiden of a mass production economy which everywhere reinforces the notion dramatically that hard work is what dim-witted people do. A magical machine exists for every job.

In such a world as this, the real political problem is keeping people occupied. Jobs have to be invented by government agencies and corporations - both must employ millions upon millions of people for which they have no real use. And somehow conceal what is happening so "workers" don't feel too bad and social instability can be avoided. In a society such as we have created, child labor laws are an absolute essential to keep young men and women at their brightest and most energetic moment from massively aggravating the real problem. Setting aside the romantically sentimental arguments about childhood, which in light of condom distribution in schools, the dramatic content of MTV, etc. appear increasingly Alice in Wonderlandish, violation of the work plank of the Christian curriculum has backed us into a corner from which no authority has any idea how to extricate us. The denial of substantial apprenticeship programs through schooling (as is done in Germany and elsewhere) or even the mounting of efficient "shop" programs is more from the same piece of lumberdash; we cannot economically afford to let children work, or even learn to work, for fear they may

discover the great secret of all human history, that work is not a curse; that it carries within itself impressive rewards divorced from praise or paychecks, that it is the only reliable key to a strong self-image, self-respect, physical health, independence, self-reliance, and a whole host of other values.

We have come to believe that we cannot turn back, and that any agency which preserves this secret knowledge, as, for instance, the Amish, the Mormons, or the Christian Scientists do, must be marginalized (or taken into the control structure) for fear word will get out and a revolution occur which no army or police force could stop.

Self-control vs. Loss of control. In a world without real work where intellectual development is restricted only to those needed for policy-making positions and a support staff for these, where men are seen as gods and no divine injunction need be obeyed, where is the need to practice self-control? Indeed, what is there to do apart from emotional indulgence? In such an environment any phenomenon which can arouse emotional response over and over and over again without satiation can be expected to become the most valued time-killers of all. Dramatic tales that follow familiar satisfying patterns, brief musical narratives, sporting events, visual displays, dramatized acts of violence, sexual acts, etc.

Through these recreations millions of people can live vicariously an emotionally meaningful sequence which they could not earn for themselves through actual social participation in the world. But the vicarious experience lacks staying power unless it can be augmented by some actual emotional thrill, so private lives are riddled with actual opportunities; to fuck, steal, take drugs, drive fast, get drunk, overeat and flashdance in general.

Once again, in thinking about this you should ask yourself, "Given the premises of Eden, what else is there to do?". Children, without having words or concepts to express themselves precisely, are very well tuned to what they need - and are being kept from by forced confinement schooling on our national model - and what the allowable substitutes for this need are. Here we have an impossible dynamic for a classroom teacher to solve.

The last rejection out of the code of penalty Original Sin imposed was the fact of Death. But the one syllable conceals a world of careful preparation, beginning in youth, for a progressive series of changes brought about by aging - as the body weakens, the spirit should strengthen; as Beauty fades, it takes Vanity with it; as we tend the young, so they must tend us; and so forth. But the fact that we are going to die is absolutely the only thing that gives any action committed or omitted any meaning - for if we lived an Eternity there would always be time to try again.

So recognition of aging as an almost miraculously complicated agency of meaning; as the writer of so many internal dramas the student of this kind of theater could never be bored; as something to be enjoyed rather than tolerated or feared; as an utterly essential part of being human at all. To run from this is to run from being at all.

It would take a long book of its own to adequately begin to discuss the flight from death, sickness, and age in our culture or how crucial the role has been that the schools have played in this folly. It would take an equally long book to come to terms with the staggering percentage of our total economy devoted to avoiding death and aging, from the 12% the medical industry consumes to the untold billions spent on cosmetics, potions, oils, vitamins, unguents, ointments, massage artists, plastic surgeons, gymnasiums, coaches, gurus, publications, health technology, psychological advice, and all the rest of the dreary catalogue. Christopher Lasch estimated that about 22% of all American jobs involve some kind of surveillance upon one's fellow citizens (and I'm not sure whether he included schoolteachers in that total), but certainly the avoidance of death - which would include the sub-industry that hides the old near death so younger people won't have to worry before their time - must rival surveillance as an aspect of both our financial economy and

the subtler yet more pervasive social/psychological economy which robs our lives of positive meaning.

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I realize I've presented you here with a large thesis which by its nature will not submit to the kind of "proof" you find in a courtroom or a piece of German scholarship. Yet, each of you has a great deal of experience with the raw material of life, enough, I am confident, to decide how true this theory might be, or how useful in your own plans and thoughts. I've contended that a human management device was discovered by the descendants of the New England Calvinists, that group we usually refer to as "progressives", which entailed the systematic unweaving of the world view of traditional Christianity and the discarding of its curriculum of morality, labor, self-control, and courage in the face of death.

All of these things had, at one time, been considered under the control of every individual's free will, but that notion of individuality eventually began to seem a serious impediment to forces that wished to collectivize the American masses. The motives behind this wish are not, I think, what Marxist and other social critics believe them to be (which is to say, material or power/control motives), though evidence can be turned up to support those cases. I think the aggressive hostility to the religion of Christianity and its curriculum signal what we are really in the presence of - and that is nothing short of a new religion whose ultimate idea of Paradise is not completely clear yet, but which, through our schools and our economy, has left a trail of clues which point in the direction of at least one conclusion.

It has discarded Original Sin and is even now working resolutely to restore the pre-Christian Eden, to which my own response is this:
I prefer not to.

Note: This passionately polemical essay actually constitutes a chapter of John's new book (The Empty Child), not yet published. We are grateful to John for allowing us to include it! Oh - I hasten to add, I am using the term polemical in an admiring capacity.

By John Taylor Gatto